

EXCUSE ME!

RUPERT HUGHES
NOVELIZED FROM THE
COMEDY OF THE SAME
NAME.
ILLUSTRATED FROM
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CHAPTER XXXIX.

Wolves in the Fold.
Mallory's heart sank to its usual depth, but Marjorie had another of her inspirations. She started everybody by suddenly beckoning and calling: "Excuse me, Mr. Robber. Come here, please."

The curious gallant edged her way, keeping a sharp watch along the line: "What d'you want?"

Marjorie leaned nearer, and spoke in a low tone with an amiable smile: "That lady who wanted to kiss you has a bracelet up her sleeve."

The robber stared across his mask, and wondered, but laughed, and grunted: "Much obliged." Then he went back, and tapped Kathleen on the shoulder. When she turned round, in the hope that he had reconsidered his refusal to make the trade, he infuriated her by growling: "Excuse me, miss, I overlooked a bet."

He ran his hand along her arm, and found her bracelet, and accomplished what Mallory had failed in, its removal.

"Don't, don't," cried Kathleen, "it's wished on."

"I wish it off," the villain laughed, and it joined the growing heap in the feed-bag.

Kathleen, doubly enraged, broke out viciously: "You're a common, sneaking—"

"Ah, turn round!" the man roared, and she obeyed in silence.

Then he explored Mrs. Whitcomb, but with such small reward that he said: "Say, you'd oughter have a pocketbook somewhere. Where's it at?"

Mrs. Whitcomb blushed furiously: "None of your business, you low brute."

"Perdooce, madame," the scoundrel snorted, "perdooce the purse, or I'll hunt for it myself."

Mrs. Whitcomb turned away, and after some manangement of her skirts, slapped her handbag into the eager palm with a wrathful: "You're no gentleman, sir!"

"If I was, I'd be in Wall street," he laughed. "Now you can turn round."

And when she turned, he saw a bit of chain depending from her back hair. He tugged, and brought away the lock, and then proceeded to sound Ashton for hidden wealth.

And now Mrs. Temple began to sob, as she parted with an old-fashioned brooch and two old-fashioned rings that had been her little vanities for the quarter of a century and more.

The old clergyman could have wept with her at the vandalism. He turned on the wretch with a heart-sick appeal:

"Can't you spare those? Didn't you ever have a mother?"

The robber started, his fierce eyes softened, his voice choked, and he gulped hard as he drew the back of his hand across his eyes.

"Aw, hell," he whimpered, "that ain't fair. If you're going to remind me of my poor old mother—"

But the one called Jake—the Claude Duval who had been prevented from a display of human sentiment, did not intend to be cheated. He thundered: "Stop it, Bill. You tend strictly to business, or I'll blow your mush-bowl off. You know your Maw died before you was born."

This reminder sobered the weeping thief at once, and he went back to work ruthlessly. "Oh, all right, Jake. Sorry, maw'm, but business is business." And he dumped Mrs. Temple's trinkets into the satchel. It was too much for the little old lady's little old husband. He fairly shrieked:

"Young man, you're a damned scoundrel, and the best argument I ever saw for hell-fire!"

Mrs. Temple's grief changed to horror at such a bolt from the blue: "Walter!" she gasped, "such language!"

But her husband answered in self-defense: "Even a minister has a right to swear once in his lifetime."

Mallory almost dropped in his tracks, and Marjorie keeled over on him, as he gasped: "Good Lord, Dr. Temple, you are a—minister?"

"Yes, my boy," the old man confessed, glad that the robbers had relieved him of his guilty secret along with the rest of his private properties. Mallory looked at the collapsing Marjorie and groaned: "And he was in the next berth all this time!"

The unmasking of the old fraud made a second sensation. Mrs. Fosdick called from far down the aisle: "Dr. Temple, you're not a detective?"

Mrs. Temple shouted back furiously: "How dare you?"

But Mrs. Fosdick was crying to her juries-eyed mate: "Oh, Arthur, he's not a detective. Embrace me!"

And they embraced, while the robbers looked on aghast at the sudden oblivion they had fallen into. They focused the attention on themselves again, however, with a ferocious: "Here, hands up!" But they did not see that Mrs. Fosdick steel a kiss

behind their upraised arms, for the robber to whose lot Mallory fell was gloating over his well-filled wallet. Mallory saw it go with fortitude, but not a piece of legal paper, he said: "Say, old man, you don't want that marriage license, do you?"

The robber handled it as if it were hot—as if he had burned his fingers on some such document once before, and he stuffed it back in Mallory's pocket. "I should say not. Keep it. Turn round."

Meanwhile the other felon turned up another beautiful pile of bills in Dr. Temple's pocket. "Not so worse for a parson," he grinned. "You must be one of them Fifth Avenue skyscrapers."

And now Mrs. Temple's gentle eyes and voice filled with tears again: "Oh, don't take that. That's the money for his vacation—after thirty long years. Please don't take that."

Her appeals seemed always to find the tender spot of this robber's heart, for he hesitated, and called out: "Shall we overlook the parson's wad, podner?"

"Take it, and shut up, you molly-coddle!" was the answer he got, and the vacation funds joined the old gew-gaws.

And now everybody had been robbed but Marjorie. She happened to be at the center of the line, and both men reached her at the same time: "I seen her first," the first one shouted.

"You did not," the other roared.

"I tell you I did."

"I tell you I did." They glared threateningly at each other, and their revolvers seemed to meet, like two game cocks, beak to beak.

The porter voiced the general hope, when he sighed: "Oh, Lawd, if they'd only shoot each other."

This brought the rivals to their evil senses, and they swept the line with those terrifying muzzles and that heart-stopping yell: "Hands up!"

Bill said: "You take the east side of her, and I'll take the west."

"All right."

And they began to snatch away her side-combs, the little gold chain at her throat, the jeweled pin that Mallory had given her as the first token of his love.

The young soldier had foreseen this. He had foreseen the wild rage that would unseat his reason when he saw the dirty hands of thieves laid rudely on the sacred body of his beloved. But his soldier-schooling had drilled him to govern his impulses, to play the coward when there was no hope of successful battle, and to strike only when the moment was ripe with perfect opportunity.

He had kept telling himself that when the finger of one of these men touched so much as Marjorie's hair, he would be forced to fling himself on the profane interloper. And he kept telling himself that the moment he did this, the other man would calmly blow a hole through him, and drop him at Marjorie's feet, while the other passengers shrank away in terror.

He told himself that, while it might be a fine impulse to leap to her defense, it was a fool impulse to leap off a precipice and leave Marjorie alone among strangers, with a dead man and a scandal, as the only rewards for his impulse. He vowed that he would hold himself in check, and let the robbers take everything, leaving him only the name of coward, provided they left him also the power to defend Marjorie better at another time.

And now that he saw the clumsy-handed thugs rifling his sweetheart's jewelry, he felt all that he had foreseen, and his head fought almost in vain against the white fire of his heart. Between them he trembled like a leaf, and the sweat globed on his forehead.

The worst of it was the shivering terror of Marjorie, and the pitiful eyes she turned on him. But he clenched his teeth and waited, thinking fiercely, watching, like a hovering eagle, a chance to swoop.

But the robbers kept glancing this way and that, and one motion would mean death. They themselves were so overwrought with their own ordeal and its immediate conclusion, that they would have killed anybody. Mallory shifted his foot cautiously, and instantly a gun was jabbed into his stomach, with a snarl: "Don't you move!"

"Who's moving?" Mallory answered, with a poor imitation of a careless laugh.

And now the man called Bill had reached Marjorie's right hand. He chortled: "Golly, look at the shiners."

But Jake, who had chosen Marjorie's left hand, roared:

"Say, you cheated. All I get is this measly plain gold band."

"Oh, don't take that!" Marjorie gasped, clenching her hand.

Mallory's heart ached at the thought

of this final sacrifice. He had the license, and the minister at last—and now the fiends were going to carry off the wedding ring. He controlled himself with a desperate effort, and stooped to plead: "Say, old man, don't take that. That's not fair."

"Shut up, both of you," Jake growled, and jabbed him again with the gun.

He gave the ring a jerk, but Marjorie, in the very face of the weapon, would not let go. She struggled and tugged, weeping and imploring: "Oh, don't, don't take that! It's my wedding ring."

"Agh, what do I care!" the ruffian snarled, and wrenched her finger so viciously that she gave a little cry of pain.

That broke Mallory's heart. With a wild, howling, "Damn you!" he hurled himself at the man, with only his bare hands for weapons.

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